

# The Influence of Artistic Kitsch on the Formation of Political Memes

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Memes are a fundamental aspect of digital culture in the era of globalisation. As a powerful mode of communication, they reach vast audiences and exert significant influence on society. Their origins are closely tied to the concept of kitsch and its proliferation within 20th-century culture and art. Kitsch, which transitioned from *low art* to the realm of camp, paved the way for forms that serve a potent communicative function. By transforming simple images into widely recognisable symbols that circulate rapidly and embed themselves in collective consciousness, memes establish a foundation for aesthetic evaluation. Political memes, in particular, fulfil ideological, art-therapeutic, and recreational roles, often characterised by a pronounced comic element. Their connection to kitsch offers fertile ground for interdisciplinary research, highlighting the cultural and aesthetic intersections between these phenomena. | *Keywords: Kitsch, Political Memes, Globalisation, Mass Consumption, Digital Culture, Humour*

## 1. Introduction

Globalisation is a process that leads to the development of mass consumption. The scale of this phenomenon can be observed in various cultural spheres. The formation of the consciousness of the masses, which is revealed in the consumer dimensions of human activity, is influenced by the targeted impact created by the development of the industry of professional political centres. They affect the worldview of a citizen who is a potential voter, accustoming him or her to the use of simplified models, depriving him or her of the right to make his or her own decisions. Thus, instead of a politically stable voter, a simulated model of his or her political activity is created, which is formed by manipulating and simplifying visual political images. Political memes are a form that helps to broadcast these narratives. These social practices can be seen as a kind of modern kitsch. Greenberg explained kitsch as a mechanical art that embodies fake emotions and the falsity of modern life, which indicates

that it belongs to mass art, easily adapted by totalitarian culture. Memes, as part of digital culture, are a means of expressing trends in society. They reflect the reaction to public discourse and reveal the current political moods of society members. Contemporary political practices are a dynamic socio-cultural space where new cultural practices that are significant for the majority of the population are quickly adopted and actively used. This is the reason why we consider political memes as reflecting the current state of development of neo-kitsch. In addition, we can see how many political technologists and political leaders work with political memes, which improves their use in the political culture of society. The meme has become quite popular in the American presidential election process because of its low cost of creation, the ability to eclectically use previous cultural heritage, and the ability to appeal to a large, diverse audience. A meme is a mass product, it is aimed at a large number of consumers who do not have specialised artistic or cultural training or education, but it can convey messages and narratives that are most understandable and necessary for political technologists. At the same time, a meme is not an official verbal message constructed as a coherent literary text. However, it may contain a verbal textual component that is necessarily tied to a narrative image. A meme in the digital space can be visual or in other forms that are available to digital culture. Given the change in the vector of development of the space of contemporary culture and the shift of emphasis to digital culture, cyberspace is becoming a mediator of human sensuality and identity. Fierce political races, business life, education, science, medicine, art, everyday life, and other practices take place in the digital dimension. The presence of a large number of people, especially after the forced isolation of humanity during the Covid-19 pandemic, has led to a total significant impact of digital forms of interaction on various cultural phenomena. The true essence of a meme is to devalue or exalt through various forms of humour and to form one's own interpretation of events in the process of interaction. The vast majority of political memes convey narratives in an emotional, humorous, accessible form that is inherent in the masses and encourages a new sensibility. The aesthetic characteristics of memes reveal their closeness to mass art, which gave rise to kitsch and camp, where humorous approaches to the depicted object are manifested in different ways.

That is why conducting a comparative analysis of them, potentially across several dimensions, is advisable. It is necessary to determine the aesthetic characteristics of memes as practices of mass culture of the present and compare them with kitsch.

## **2. Kitsch as a Component of Consumer Culture**

The process of urbanisation caused by industrialisation has shaped the culture of the city, in which the status artistic practice of the upper classes began to be imitated. It created demand for goods, including artistic goods, which demonstrate the solvency of the city's citizens. This phenomenon was emphasised by Thorstein Veblen, who defined the characteristics of the development of the leisure class engaged in demonstrative consumption (Veblen, 1899). The formation of kitsch, which is often characterised by mass

production, commercial nature and appeal to popular tastes, can be seen as a form of demonstrative consumption. The spread of kitsch reveals not the recipient's personal interest and pleasure, but the acquisition of social status through consumption.

Kitsch can be seen as a multilevel phenomenon. Some authors interpret it as a purely artistic phenomenon. However, it is not uncommon to have an in-depth vision of it that reveals a connection with other spheres, not just art. Milan Kundera interpreted kitsch as an integral part of politics. For him, it is like glue that unites different political communities, and its purpose is to *hide death*. The diversity of kitsch inherent in free societies is expressed in the form of republican, democratic, or ecological kitsch. If they are available, then

competing influences cancel or limit one another can manage more or less to escape the kitsch inquisition: the individual can preserve his individuality; the artist can create unusual works. But whenever a single political movement corners power, we find ourselves in the realm of totalitarian kitsch. (Kundera, 2008, p. 132)

This is how we record the interdependence of political and artistic activity. Aesthetics comes in the form of aesthetic feelings after the interaction of these activities as a consequence, conclusion or protest.

Monika Kjellman-Chapin argues that kitsch is a variable concept that crosses a variety of related fields, including commercialism, artistic and aesthetic counterfeiting, class-related taste standards, and the conceptualisation of camp (Kjellman-Chapin, 2009). Walter Benjamin's interpretation distinguishes reproductive photographic tourist art, which is a subcategory of kitsch (Benjamin, 1970).

Kitsch as an artistic phenomenon became widespread as a result of the emergence of the Art Nouveau style, which in the early twentieth century was marked by a wealth of ornamentation in architecture and design. Accordingly, this characteristic began to create associations with the feminine. Decorativeness, pomp, and floral motifs became dominant, defining the originality of new forms embodied in modern buildings, their interiors and exteriors. The criticism of kitsch by modernists, including the Austrian architect Adolf Loos, who in his work *Ornament and Crime* (Loos, 1998) defines kitsch as a sign of primitivism and feminine taste, which are perceived as negative, removes it from avant-garde trends. Nevertheless, kitsch does not disappear, given the background that shaped it.

Kitsch is often considered tasteless or overly sentimental because it is heavily influenced by gender perceptions. As Ruth Holliday and Tracy Potts (2012) point out, both in the Victorian period and in the early twentieth century, the domestic space and its decoration became a place for expressing femininity, which was often trivialised or rejected as kitsch by modernist criticism. Here, kitsch appears not just as an aesthetic choice, but as a gender marker that often undermines women's creative expression as superficial or secondary to more *serious* cultural forms dominated by men (masculinity).

With the rise of consumer culture after World War II, the role of women as consumers of mass-produced goods became central. The transition to a consumer society, where goods were often sold on the basis of aesthetic appeal rather than functionality, strengthened the association of kitsch with femininity, as women were primarily aimed at consuming decorative objects. Thus, the prerequisites for kitsch and its promotion in culture reveal the connection between the spread of globalisation, consumer society, and the formation of a circle of potential recipients.

Kitsch could not, in fact, either emerge or prosper without the existence of kitsch-man, the lover of kitsch; as a producer of art he produces kitsch and as a consumer of art is prepared to acquire it and pay quite handsomely for it. (Broch, 1968, p. 49)

There is a homogenisation of taste, which leads to the proliferation of mass, commercially oriented and highly aesthetically simplified artefacts. By creating the conditions for the spread of a standardised commodity around the world, an artistic commodity emerges that can be easily commercialised and sold in different cultures. Valentin Bushanskyi defines kitsch as follows: it is “eclecticism, sincere, inspired and uncritical. It is sentimentality brought to the point of humiliation, humanity that seems about to start snarling with a toothless mouth, pathetic without feeling, petty grandeur” (Bushanskyi, 2011, p.145). Its accessibility and simplified artistic language allow for the creation of a global consumer network. Imitation, as well as copying, leads to the preservation of formal characteristics, which lose the essence of the phenomenon and the model.

The answer to the question of why kitsch, which is a product of mass culture, spreads is to form a solvent community.

In the context of mass culture, it is the masses who determine which values and artifacts come to the fore, that is, which have priority, and which must remain in the shadows... The point, of course, is the most vulgar thing – solvency. The consumer (even when it comes to culture) determines production, including the work of artists. (Bushanskyi, 2012, p. 124)

Kitsch in the context of the spread of the cultural industry is becoming the dominant form of artifact distribution, as pointed out by Theodor Adorno (1991). Instead of inventing something fundamentally new, there is a repetition, duplication, and replication of the most popular things. And in the context of the decline of art, there is a demand for other forms that have artistic characteristics, but they are not dominant. Moreover, according to Bushansky, the hierarchy between social strata, as well as between different types of cultures, is disappearing, and they are beginning to be comprehensively replicated. “Both high art (classical works) and folklore have become exclusively material for kitschy replication” (Bushanskyi, 2012, p. 132).

Clement Greenberg's essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1986) emphasises the antagonistic relationship between avant-garde (modernist) art and kitsch (commercial art). Greenberg argues that kitsch is a byproduct of modern consumer culture and class differentiation. And it seems that this opposition is reasonable and constant, but Jose Luis and Mejia Razo's work

*Greenberg's Paradox: The Influence of Modernism and Kitsch on Contemporary Art* (Razo and Luis, 2009) proves that modernism and kitsch influence contemporary art. And the authors come to the conclusion that kitsch elements are often reinterpreted and incorporated into new works of art, which leads to what the authors call the *Greenberg paradox*. This paradox describes how kitsch, which was initially considered lowbrow, becomes highly valued in both quality and monetary terms when used in contemporary art. Kitsch has evolved and undergone transformations during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It used to be a mass art that was perceived by the cultural elite as a manifestation of bad taste. However, later it acquired the meaning of a technique that Abraham Moll calls *new kitsch* or modern kitsch, the artistic embodiment of which is accompanied by retro fashion and nostalgia for the past (Moles, 2016). Through the prism of a modern vision, before the Internet as cyberspace appeared, we were talking about historical kitsch, but afterwards we have to talk about neo-kitsch, which has acquired other characteristics. Similarly, the emergence of the Internet also influenced the phenomenon of massification. Both the mass consumer and the mass product no longer belong to the same society, but instead to cyberspace. At the same time, social groups and subcultures of different societies have been globalised into a kind of synthetic unity. The mass product and the mass consumer of cyberspace have a dynamic change of group identity. The main thing is not the result, but a constant process.

Olga Mukha notes the following:

Kitsch is never a simple rejection of high art or art in general. It is a much broader phenomenon that encompasses social, economic and mental factors in addition to aesthetic ones. It no longer needs any legalisation, because it has already taken its place in the organised chaos of contemporary culture. (Mukha, 2013, p. 260)

The use of kitsch as a technique correlates with the concept of *camp*, which was introduced into wide circulation by Susan Sontag, who considered it an aestheticisation of bad taste. It was associated with the homosexual community. However, camp did not remain a phenomenon of closed communities for long, but became a response to the demand of a part of society for a new type of sensuality. With its spread, camp transformed into a technique of exaggerated *weird parody* and later into the pervasive contemporary mass culture of camp sensuality. A number of authors note the change in the interpretation of kitsch, but do not use a separate term for it. Umberto Eco notes in his works, in particular in *Apocalypse Postponed* (Eco, 1991), that kitsch plays a role in culture, and is a product of the mass media and consumer society. Eco acknowledges that postmodern art often recovers *low* culture, such as kitsch, and gives it a new, ironic value. This is similar to Sontag's interpretation of camp as being associated with self-awareness and humour. However, Eco notes that irony, instead of dismantling kitsch, can sometimes support it, making its consumption acceptable in elite or intellectual circles.

The ironic nature of kitsch, according to Eco, can blur the line between sincerity and mockery, potentially reinforcing the presence of kitsch rather than undermining it. Instead, Sontag, speaking of camp, indicates that it has a deliberate detachment. For Sontag, camp marks the artificiality and excess of kitsch, and she suggests that kitsch and camp can be valuable, creative and give freedom of expression to marginalised groups that subvert dominant norms with their aesthetics. "In this sense, kitsch and camp have opposite vectors of direction: kitsch reduces *high art*, lowering it to simple accessible schemes, while camp complicates, flirts with, aestheticism the *low*, elevating it" (Mukha, 2013, p. 88). Despite the diversity and complexity of the interpretation of kitsch and camp, a number of common and distinctive features can be identified between them, which will later be embodied in memes.

In various artistic movements, particularly in pop art, one can find elements of kitsch, which blurred the boundaries between high and low art by incorporating popular culture and commercial imagery into its works. The use of kitsch in contemporary art often serves as a critique of society, capitalism, and consumer culture. Artists such as Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami use kitsch elements to challenge traditional notions of art and provoke reflections on social values (Razo and Luis, 2009).

In fact, the way we classify art as high or low, avant-garde or kitsch is influenced by the education and social position of those in power in the art world. This process of classification affects how art is perceived, evaluated and consumed by the public. This emphasises not only the evolutionary nature of art and artistic practices, but also the fluidity of the boundaries between different artistic categories.

The development of the Internet and digital media has complicated the connection between kitsch and globalisation, as a result of which social media platforms allow the dissemination of artifacts belonging to both high and low culture. Moreover, it is the kitsch product that can go viral due to its simplicity and ability to influence an individual in the shortest possible time. This digital distribution enables a participatory culture where users can actively interact with kitsch content, change it or criticise it. Kitsch content is based on the use of texts, images, and audiovisual sources that are overly sentimental, clichéd, and intended to evoke an emotional response.

This is closely intertwined with the changes taking place in society in general and in the sphere of political activism in particular. If earlier democracy was manifested through the culture of contemplation of images created in television culture, now it is the spread of active practices that provide an opportunity to interact through online forms.

We are transitioning from a spectator democracy, in which citizens project their hopes and dreams onto charismatic leaders, to a participatory democracy, in which citizens enact change through their real-time interactions. This shift reflects more than a change in communications technologies; it marks a change in the mode and dimensional level of activism. (Rushkoff, 2019, p. 335)



The transformation of social interaction that Rushkoff writes about refers to the transition to a new technological model of interaction that will be inherent in many societies that call themselves democracies.

Tamara Hundorova aptly observes that kitsch was initially linked to tastelessness but gradually evolved into a distinct stylistic category (Hundorova, 2012, p. 465). It now embodies qualities that are inherently kitschy, reflecting a shift from being merely an inferior aesthetic object to becoming a mode of representation. This semantic evolution sheds light on the nature and functions of kitsch in the latter half of the twentieth century. Hundorova identifies two key forms of kitsch: *primary kitsch*, which retains its traditional characteristics, and *secondary kitsch*, encompassing variations such as camp, ironic kitsch, parakitsch, and what she terms *double aesthetics* (Kitch, 2013). In contemporary contexts, kitsch is best understood through the lens of *neo-kitsch*, a term that captures its integration into cyberspace, widespread reach, and dynamic, communicative essence. Neo-kitsch represents a modern iteration of this multifaceted phenomenon, thriving in the digital age where its prevalence and adaptability highlight its evolving cultural significance.

To summarise our chapter, urbanisation and industrialisation fuelled a demand for goods, including artistic ones, that signified social status. This environment gave rise to kitsch as a form of demonstrative consumption, appealing to the masses while showcasing societal affluence. In the post-World War II era, consumer culture further cemented the link between kitsch and femininity, associating it with domesticity and positioning it as inferior to the *serious* cultural forms dominated by masculinity. Kitsch flourishes in consumer-driven and globalised contexts, where homogenised tastes lead to mass production and replication. Over time, kitsch evolved from a stylistic movement into an artistic technique, influencing contemporary art movements like pop art through its incorporation into camp aesthetics. This interplay blurred the lines between *high* and *low* art, creating a paradox where kitsch, once dismissed as lowbrow, gained appreciation in elite cultural spaces. The advent of the Internet and digital media transformed kitsch into *neo-kitsch* - a global, dynamic, and participatory phenomenon. Neo-kitsch thrives on sentimental, exaggerated, and humorous elements, often achieving viral popularity. Social media amplifies its spread, enabling user interaction and reshaping its cultural significance. Neo-kitsch mirrors broader societal changes, shifting from passive spectator democracy to participatory democracy, where digital interactions redefine daily practices, community engagement, and civic participation. Its presence in cyberspace highlights the intersection of aesthetics, technology, and the global homogenisation of culture.

The cyberspace of various democratic societies will reflect neo-kitsch with its digital aesthetics that combines kitsch elements with modern technological challenges. This is a new kitsch content that deliberately exploits superficial, bright and sentimental images to create an instant mass emotional effect. We will inevitably encounter sentimentalism and populism, interactivity and eclecticism, simulation and humour. Kitsch, in its various forms and

interpretations, continues to evolve, reflecting wider social, technological and cultural transformations. Its adaptability and mass appeal ensure its continued presence in contemporary art, media and global culture.

### 3. Political Memes are Born from Kitsch in the Modern Information Space

Kitsch should be seen as a modern phenomenon that mediates desires, as a communicative system that conveys ideas and embodies meanings in everyday life. A meme is another communicative form that conveys meanings. This is the source of kitsch memes. Moreover, their communicative nature and focus on creating the desired image of a product or person is also a common feature. Tamara Hundorova says that the communicative role of kitsch is especially relevant in postmodern society, where kitsch

becomes an extremely important meta-language - a communication channel that represents desires, advertises emotions and roles, participates in the creation of political and cultural myths, helping to turn abstract slogans into glamorous emblems. (Hundorova, 2012, p. 475)

In her opinion, kitsch is part of the process of the perception and representation of the other - the racially, culturally, socially, politically and gendered other. The social function of kitsch is manifested in the fact that with its help, ways of understanding are formed between representatives of different races, nations, classes, genders, professions, "regardless of the difference in political views, upbringing and material status" (Hundorova, 2012, p. 475). As we see, in contemporary society, kitsch is becoming an important mechanism for transforming ideas into popular symbols that not only evoke emotions but also influence the formation of cultural or political myths. It also works as a bridge between different social, cultural or gender groups, promoting common understanding through the universality of its aesthetic code. Thanks to its ability to unite diverse views and experiences, kitsch is not only an aesthetic category, but also a social tool that creates conditions for dialogue between people with different life experiences. The transformation of kitsch and the ability to adapt to changes caused by social demands create a situation where kitsch moves from one form to another. And this is what allows it to become digital kitsch in the current context in the form of memes. In our opinion, this idea is revealed in Brigitte Munier's work *Aux bonheurs du kitsch*, where the author points out that:

Born of the first industrial revolution, kitsch easily conquered the third and, as a great user of stereotypes, adapted to the peculiarities of digital communication: by mobilising the senses, it humanises the continuous flow of information exchanged online and encourages the illusion of sharing, but its recourse to common ideas and stereotypes hinders mutual understanding and communication. (Munier, 2019, p. 143)

Kitsch, which emerged in the late nineteenth century, has adapted to the digital age, using its ability to unify and operate with stereotypes, and in the modern information environment it serves as a mechanism that creates the illusion of community through the emotional colouring of information. However, this superficial unification often blocks genuine interaction and



understanding between communication participants. Equally important are such kitsch characteristics as repetitiveness and seriality, which can be seen in forms of digital interaction. Seriality, which is based on the principle of repetition, allows “to use old clichés and form new ones, to homogenise perception, colouring it with sublime, libidinous pleasure, and colonise it with homogeneous ideas-delusions” (Hundorova, 2012, p. 477). The repetitiveness of kitsch contributes to the consolidation of stereotypes and the formation of a homogeneous perception that brings aesthetic pleasure, but at the same time limits imagination and imposes monotonous patterns. This repetitiveness contributes to the construction of simplified idealised images that simplify the perception of complex reality, while depriving it of depth and diversity.

According to Munier, contemporary kitsch is pervasive, with a growing stream of derivative products designed to give a tangible and touching form to the *memory* of films, bestsellers, events, exhibitions, museums and travel. Overcoming even the resistance of the intangible, kitsch conquers the digital space through immersive exhibitions and the practice of emoticons.

Munier calls the emoticon or smiles a representative of virtual kitsch, which all digitally savvy people certainly know. These are stylised faces in the shape of a yellow circle with two eyes, a nose and a mouth, the different orientation of which can mean several emotions. Emoticons form a catalogue of simple emotional stereotypes. Widely used in text messages, these emoticons convey an emotion to the recipient that they are supposed to feel and share with the author. The standardisation of these clichés compensates for the effort required to understand others, while avoiding misunderstandings inherent in all human communication. The author presents the emoticon as a modern form of digital kitsch – a paradigm of sentimental figurative clichés. Manifestations of kitsch can be traced in various formats of the digital universe, such as selfies, posts, memes available on social media.

Richard Dawkins in his work *The Selfish Gene* points out that memes can be “melodies, ideas, buzzwords and expressions” (Dawkins, 1976, p. 257). For a thesis to be acceptable, its presentation must be effective, quick, and simplified. It should be perceived not only rationally, but also evoke a certain range of emotions. An Internet meme is a similar form of argumentation.

Due to the ease of interpreting political events in the form of a meme, social media users can be quickly identified. The level of trust and openness of communication is growing.

When we share our self-reflections with the world, we turn media on its head. The Internet has allowed the masses to communicate individually. Instead of communicating to one another, we now communicate many to many, or few to few. (Rettberg, 2005, p. 7)

The use of political Internet memes reduces the rationality of perception, through the use of emotional stereotyping and primitivisation, and creates the basis for the formation of sustainable constructs that will reduce the level of intellectual engagement of recipients.

Internet discourse is defined as a complex system of digital interaction that does not contain clear rules for the implementation of communication, leading to the emergence of new trends in the objectification of thoughts, the formation and transformation of phenomena and ideas in the minds of individuals and society as a whole. One of the methods of this transmission of ideas is the socio-cultural phenomenon of memes.

Depending on the form of memes, they are divided into textual (words, phrases or sentences); visual (pictures, videos); and creolised (verbal-visual). Due to its textual content, visual characteristics, humorous and emotionally expressive components with an allusive basis, a creolised meme is relevant, concentrated, has a standardised laconic form, is characterised by virality and the ability to self-replicate.

Memes, similar to the simulacra described by Baudrillard, exist in the virtual space and have no real analogues. Their formation and circulation on social media define their characteristic features. "Memes are an aesthetic trend that attracts and shapes subjective, collective and political moods" (Horyunova, 2016, p. 54).

In our opinion, a meme is a media product that is easy to view, evaluate with the help of likes, and spread quickly. It is a kind of collage of quotes and references that can be ironic, frivolous, superficial, but at the same time true and critical of socially important topics. As an information unit, memes have such characteristics as a wide social media audience, high replicability and rapid spread.

Typically, memes have a simple structure – an image with text or a short video – which makes them easy to digest. Their humour is often based on everyday situations or universal experiences that many people can relate to, which increases their appeal. Successful memes contain unexpected twists and turns in captions that elicit laughter through a sudden change in context or perspective. This transformation of expectations is achieved through the use of well-known cultural references in the digital space.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *carnival laughter* provides the conceptual basis for a modern understanding of digital culture. Bakhtin viewed the carnival as a space where the world is turned upside down, where hierarchies are temporarily suspended, and high culture is mixed with the popular, the grotesque and the absurd (Bakhtin, 1984). Digital culture should be seen as a form of modern carnival – massive, accessible, somewhat hypertrophied, where *high* and *low* art forms are mixed. In the digital space, it seems that the action is constant and endless, ambivalent.

Digital culture, like the carnival, is a space where social norms are nullified or ridiculed. Memes, as a phenomenon of digital culture, borrow from the carnival the magic of temporary liberation from the rigours of everyday life. For Bakhtin, laughter in the carnival context challenges authority and exposes the relativity of established truths. Making fun of the authorities and politicians becomes a way to deprive them of their mystique and dominant

position. Political memes build on this tradition by using humour to expose the overblown rhetoric and images of political figures. Bakhtin's ideas highlight an important ambivalence: while ridicule can be liberating and democratising, it can also become a tool for maintaining the status quo. In some cases, the culture of laughter reduces complex political criticism to mere entertainment, blunting its transformative potential.

Political memes address events taking place in a particular society, making them timely and relevant. They create a sense of belonging to a community that shares the views of the *creator*. The meme template is repeated with slight variations to adapt to different contexts. It should be easily adaptable and transformable in accordance with the content that is being disseminated.

The next feature is that political memes have their own level of exclusivity. They require knowledge of the context, which makes them particularly resonant and funny for those who are *in the know* but incomprehensible to outsiders. They often use satire, irony and sarcasm to comment on social norms and the actions of politicians. It is not just entertainment, but a means of provoking dialogical reflection or criticism in a relaxed manner. Political memes constitute a separate group because of their thematic focus. They can be identified by the emphasis on covering specific events, facts or situations related to the activities of public figures - MPs, members of the Cabinet of Ministers, the President, etc.

Given that managing the flow of information disseminated in the Internet space is an important feature of the functioning and development of political figures, forces and organisations, its monitoring is extremely important and may form part of the national security concept. This process can be both spontaneous and directed. Accordingly, their existence can have both a positive and negative impact on the political image and political process. Political memes are usually aimed at specific figures and events of global or local significance. Their emergence may not be spontaneous, as well as the principle of replication. That is, their promotion is a means of lowering the rating of politicians, undermining certain initiatives, etc.

Oleksij Shevchenko (2011) points out that modern state mechanisms go through a stage of glamorisation, where, as a result of the spread of consumer culture, politicians become its active representatives.

The state itself becomes an active lobbyist of the culture of consumption, and its leaders become vivid examples of such consumption. Just like the know-it-alls, politicians are turning into mannequins for demonstrating expensive dresses, diamond watches, expensive cars, castle mansions, and ostentatious consumption is not only a feature of the government style of countries like Russia and Ukraine. Gradually, such consumption is becoming a kind of international standard. (Shevchenko, 2011, p. 134)

That is why their behaviour and forms of glamorised activity receive coverage and commentary, including through memes, developing in the direction of political and aesthetic phenomenology (Shevchenko, 2011, p. 137).

Memes are aimed at spreading a certain cultural code. Their nature and ability to persuade allow us to explain a meme as a logical chain of argumentation that appeals not only to rational structures of perception but also to emotional experience. In the political sphere, this influence becomes a force that shapes social reality.

In the world of memes, politicians are often presented not as strategic decision-makers or professionals but as ordinary people with flaws, blunders, or even peculiar quirks. This portrayal fosters a sense of *humanisation* – a double-edged sword that can either endear them to voters or undermine their image as authoritative leaders. Memes thrive on simplicity, delivering quick, emotionally resonant messages that are easy to digest and remember. However, this often comes at the expense of depth and context. By reducing the complexity of a politician's public persona and fixating on their awkward or amusing moments, memes can inadvertently suggest that their political actions are equally trivial or ineffective. For instance, a meme mocking a politician's mannerisms, attire, or verbal slip-ups often leaves a stronger impression on the public than intricate debates about their policies or accomplishments. A meme highlighting a politician's perceived ineptitude or foolishness can cement a lasting, negative stereotype, even if it is far from the truth. Politicians who grasp the dynamics of contemporary media can successfully turn memes to their advantage. Embracing self-deprecating humour or cleverly responding to online jabs can help cultivate a relatable and likable image or popularity. In these instances, memes transition from being a threat to becoming a tool for forging stronger connections with the electorate. Thus, the use of humour in memes can reshape a politician's image, either enhancing it positively or casting it in a negative light.

We are talking about the acquisition or loss of credibility, significance and power of the politician's image or event through memes. A striking example of a political meme that, in 2022, was able to bring Ukrainian society out of a state of distress and deprive the world's famous political leader, Vladimir Putin, of his image of an invincible ruler of the world is meme *Russian warship, go f\*\*\* yourself* (Meme Wars, 2024). In Iryna Kabluchko's documentary *MEME WARS. Folk humour strikes back. Documentary premiere* (2024) outlines the role of memes in the development of the culture of resistance of the Ukrainian people during the full-scale invasion, and presents the views on this phenomenon from both ordinary citizens and experts in the field of cultural anthropology. Laada Bilaniuk, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Washington, was invited as one of the experts. In her speeches and in her article *Memes as Antibodies* (Bilaniuk, 2023), she analyses the role of memes as a cultural response of Ukrainian society to Russian military aggression. The author sees memes as a kind of immune defence against ideological and cultural threats that accompany military action. Through memes, Ukrainians not only express their resistance, but also strengthen their national identity, emphasising their uniqueness and difference from Russian culture. Memes play a role in the formation of an imaginary national community that unites people of different regions, social statuses, languages

and diasporas. They are becoming a means of cultural resistance, testifying to the bravery, resilience and solidarity of Ukrainians in the difficult conditions of war. This phenomenon highlights the ability of memes to transform social media into an important battlefield where cultural, emotional and political aspects intersect.

Olena Voznesenska highlights that memes, as a product of collective creativity, demonstrated both artistic and therapeutic potential during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Their role in addressing the collective trauma experienced by Ukrainian society cannot be overstated (Voznesenska, 2022). Voznesenska introduces the concept of media art therapy, which integrates elements of therapy, art, and modern information technologies. She argues that meme creation constitutes a creative process within the realm of media, serving as a therapeutic outlet. The emotional foundation of memes, she notes, reflects the feelings of both their creators and audiences. According to Voznesenska, “Meme creation can be rightly considered a form of media art therapy for large communities, carried out through the creation, perception, and dissemination of images, videos, and texts” (2022, p.27). Thematically, these memes captured the emotional states of Ukrainians – expressing defiance against their enemies, reinforcing symbols of national importance, distancing themselves from adversaries, and commemorating significant events. In response to the collective trauma, a strategy for coping emerged through media creativity, where co-creation played a vital role. This co-creation extended not only to the co-development of the memes themselves, but also to the joint interpretation and interaction with sharing.

During the information wars, which are part of the active hostilities of the Russian-Ukrainian war, there is a state monopoly on television, vertical control and censorship of content. At the same time, less controlled media channels broadcast uncontrolled content and present material more freely. In closed communities, the spread of political memes takes on a different tone than in open media. In particular, the article by Olena Pavlova and Mariia Rogozha presents the experience of studying the Viber content of groups of residents of the occupied Ukrainian city of Mariupol. Online communities are a space of civic activism where relative freedom of thought is possible.

The study of new forms of civic activism in media communities proved that they are less politically engaged, self-critical, and incapable of managing dissent. However, the presence of such trust networks serves as a breeding ground for civic activism and spontaneous forms of deliberative democracy. (Pavlova and Rohozha, 2023, p. 262)

Instead, in the open space, the possibility of freedom of expression will be available only in an ironic form, where the true position of network users is revealed under the symbolic, allegorical and metaphorical images of memes.

The formation of communities in Ukrainian society has been carried out permanently, in connection with certain professional or educational needs. Similarly, during the occupation of Ukrainian cities, there was a spread of grassroots movement of Viber communities, which is a “form of deliberative democracy, a form of organising a non-political social space in which the

social aspects are understood more broadly than the political ones” (Pavlova and Rohozha, 2023, p. 261).

The realisation of intentions through memes is aimed at spreading a certain cultural code. The nature of such a unit of information, its ability to persuade recipients, allows us to explain a meme as a chain of reasoning that has a logical basis as an argument, but appeals not only to the rational structures of the recipient. Appealing to subjective experience, which is experienced through the senses, makes it possible to quickly and effectively perceive information and simplifies its content. In the political sphere, this influence becomes a force that affects social reality. The power of such information does not lend itself to critical analysis and makes it possible to impose a certain point of view and establish an algorithm of user actions. Under this influence, the user unconsciously sacrifices his or her own identity and becomes part of a collective political entity with clearly defined ideas and beliefs.

Memes *Good evening, we are from Ukraine, Russian warship, go to...*, *Patron the dog*, *Chornobayivka*, *Cruiser ‘Moscow’* were born in the most difficult days for Ukrainians (Memes of war, 2022). They became internationally recognised and moved from the digital space to the offline format. The images of these famous memes are now replicated in tourist and souvenir products (T-shirts, stamps, socks, magnets, pillows), which are bought and given as gifts to foreign citizens who support Ukraine, including government officials. Some meme characters, like *Patron the dog*, have become part of popular culture. A series of cartoons about *Patron the dog* was made (Patron the dog, 2024), which had both an entertaining and educational function, and the song *Patron the dog* was written under the influence of the meme, which became extremely popular when performed by the band *Karta Svit* (Karta Svit, 2022). Similarly, the *Cruiser ‘Moscow’* became the basis for the song *‘maskva’* by the band *Spiv Brativ* (Spiv Brativ, 2022).

The phenomenon of kitsch, deeply embedded in modern cultural and digital environments, serves as a powerful communicative tool, embodying desires, shaping perceptions, and constructing shared meanings. In the digital age, kitsch has transformed into digital kitsch, manifesting prominently in the form of memes. Political memes, in particular, blend the characteristics of kitsch – such as simplification, emotional appeal, and repetition – with the dynamics of digital culture to create impactful, shareable narratives that resonate with diverse audiences. Memes function as a modern-day meta-language, capable of translating complex political and social realities into accessible, emotionally charged content. They borrow from traditional kitsch the capacity to unite diverse groups through shared symbols and stereotypes, while their digital nature ensures rapid dissemination and broad reach. However, this simplification often comes at the cost of depth, reducing intricate political discourse to superficial yet compelling imagery and slogans. The use of humour, satire, and irony in political memes challenges authority and disrupts traditional hierarchies, echoing Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of carnival laughter. This duality allows memes to humanise political figures, exposing their flaws and fostering relatability, but it also risks trivialising serious political



discourse. Memes' effectiveness lies in their ability to distil complex events into digestible, emotionally resonant forms, making them potent tools for influencing public opinion and shaping social realities. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, memes have demonstrated their capacity not only as tools of resistance but also as mechanisms of cultural solidarity and collective identity formation. Iconic examples such as *Russian warship, go f\*\*\* yourself* illustrate how memes transcend their digital origins to become symbols of national resilience and international recognition. Their replication in offline formats underscores their cultural and emotional significance, reinforcing their role as both artistic and therapeutic outlets. Ultimately, political memes highlight the interplay between cultural aesthetics, digital technology, and political messaging. They encapsulate the transformative potential of kitsch within the modern information space, bridging divides, amplifying voices, and reshaping perceptions in ways that are simultaneously liberating and constraining. Through their simplicity and adaptability, memes have become a defining feature of contemporary political communication, offering new opportunities and challenges for understanding and engaging with the world.

#### 4. Aesthetic Dimensions of Political Memes

Our current research fascination with memes is highly relevant, as this phenomenon serves as one of the most expressive reflections of contemporary culture and the collective spiritual state of society. Stripping away their humorous, simple, and seemingly insignificant facade reveals a powerful and multifaceted cultural phenomenon. In our view, political memes are ultra-dynamic, capturing the immediacy of the *here and now* while seamlessly penetrating and connecting various social spheres without rigidly delineating boundaries between domains such as politics, economics, culture, and art. The twenty-first century presents humanity with challenges marked by shifts in international politics and law, occurring not only in the material world but also within an ideological realm often referred to as the information, virtual, or cyber world. This shift is accompanied by transformations in cultural practices and aesthetic sensibilities. New phenomena are emerging – difficult to define yet essential to modern life – that have become integral to our everyday existence. Memes are a prime example of this, embodying what can be described as subjective universality. Immanuel Kant described this concept in his writings on aesthetic judgement, arguing that judgements of taste carry universal value because they feel subjectively valid to individuals.

Similarly, according to Stephen Best, Mia You, and Damon Ross Young, memes may contain a universal quality that remains inherently individual. This antinomy, characteristic of judgements of taste, is also reflected in the nature of modern memes. To illustrate this point:

While meme aesthetics may not embody 'purposiveness without purpose' as in Immanuel Kant's account of the beautiful (though there is an element of the gratuitous about them in their purposeless proliferation), memes' tendency to bridge the universal and the particular is part of their aesthetics, their particularly general form of subjective universality. (Best, 2024, p.8)

In our view, this thesis is highly accurate, as it captures the aesthetic essence of memes. The interpretation of memes is never entirely serious and always incorporates a degree of ambiguity, which is integral to their nature. This ambiguity underscores a key feature of meme aesthetics: their inherent connection to social function. The very act of perceiving and replicating memes indicates that their content resonates with a certain universality embedded in them by their creator. In the current study of meme aesthetics, the author Stephen Best, Mia You, and Damon Ross Young offer a compelling explanation of their fundamental properties:

This meme conjoins the zany and the interesting, but also the cute, which could describe its humorous tone as well as the man in the image, who seems as harmless and endearing as he is impassioned. In these memes, the three minor aesthetic categories described by Ngai index the core processes of capitalist exchange – production, consumption, circulation – but nothing is produced other than the form of these processes themselves. This empty and self-reflexive form, in the abyssal mode of ambiguous irony (since the memes both do and do not mean what they say), is a key aspect of meme aesthetics. (Best, 2024, p.11)

One of the defining characteristics of memes is their inherent ambiguity, which enables them to be ironic, entertaining, and thought-provoking simultaneously. This quality shapes their aesthetic identity and enhances their role in various social interactions. The authors highlight that memes function as a kind of *empty* form, reflecting the processes of creation, consumption, and circulation typical of capitalist culture. While memes often serve no purpose beyond self-reflection, this does not diminish their aesthetic or social significance. They possess the capacity to evoke emotional responses, unite audiences, and enhance collective perception by blending simplicity with irony. Memes integrate aesthetic categories such as *ridiculousness*, *curiosity*, and *cuteness* (Ngai, 2012), making them light-hearted, comical, and emotionally engaging – all forms of humour. As such, memes represent a unique aesthetic phenomenon of our time, combining depth and superficiality, seriousness and humour, universality and subjectivity. They fulfil an important social function, acting as a tool for fostering collective identity, reflecting on contemporary culture, and exposing the irony and ambivalence of the modern world.

Stephen Best, Mia You, and Damon Ross Young (Best, 2024, p.20) argue that memes not only reflect the culture of late capitalism but also function as a tool for navigating conditions that appear unavoidable. Moving away from the individual toward the general and universal, memes create a shared cultural experience. Despite their negative aspects, such as environmental degradation or the oversimplification of political issues, memes play a role in fostering sociality and facilitating collective experiences. The black humour inherent in memes unites people through shared experiences, reinforcing the sentiment that *we are all in this together*. At the same time, they challenge us to reconsider the boundaries of aesthetics and political thought, unlocking potential pathways for liberation, particularly through the influence of black humour (sarcasm, irony) on sociality – an essential aspect of their cultural significance.

In his article *'Liking' as Creating: On Aesthetic Category Memes*, Jordan Schonig also highlights the centrality of community formation in understanding the aesthetic specificity of memes. Schonig emphasises the duality of memes within the framework of neoliberal capitalism: on one hand, they serve as a form of distraction, and on the other, they activate cognitive and aesthetic capacities previously associated exclusively with art and philosophy. This duality positions memes as a cultural phenomenon that is both entertaining and meaningful for social and aesthetic development. The author further connects this perspective to Immanuel Kant's logic of aesthetic vision, which underpins the broader understanding of how we perceive and engage with the world.

I've borrowed the vocabularies of Kantian aesthetics and modernist reflexivity to describe the pleasures of such an activity because these discourses provide the best models for aesthetic engagements that feel generative of philosophical insight; that is, to appreciate a modernist painting is simultaneously to learn about the ontology of painting, the institution of art, or the phenomenology of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic category memes offer a simulacrum of these revelations. They resemble aesthetic reflexivity without the risk of disrupting the irony endemic to Internet and meme cultures. (Schonig, 2020, pp. 43–44)

The author's conclusions about the aesthetic nature of memes suggest that they serve as a medium for exchanging judgments among participants in a networked society through the act of communication.

Wasting time on the Internet can engage our aesthetic faculties as much as our affective registers, and 'feeling connected' can be as much a matter of sharing words, images, and 'likes' as it is a matter of sharing judgments. (Schonig, 2020, p. 44)

The judgments of taste formulated in the aesthetics of I. Kant are violated by the kitsch person, who, according to Sebastian Loewe (2016, p. 1) is "the most prominent theoretical figure who violates all prohibitions on pure aesthetic judgment". It is the principle of sensual pleasure that comes to the fore, changing the rationality of disinterested perception. "This kitsch-lover fully indulges in art and the sensuous aesthetic pleasure it arouses, lets his instincts corrupt his prudence, practices escapism and sees life through the infamous rose-coloured glasses" (Loewe, 2016, p. 1). People's taste preferences are clearly manifested in their attitude to the world. And kitsch, which, according to Broch, is a falsity, returns the reflection of the false world to the person who consumes these images. Reflection in artistic forms of a modern person who recognises himself in a false image and seeks "to confess his own lies (with a delight which is to a certain extent sincere)" (Broch, 1968, p. 49).

Internet memes, as a form of digital communication, are defined by their humorous essence, a core feature of their aesthetic identity. Earlier forms like kitsch and camp also relied on comedic elements, each reflecting the cultural and technological milieu of its time. Kitsch is marked by its superficiality, ornamental charm, and earnest imitation of high art, often resulting in unintended humour through naive parody. Camp, on the other hand, embraces artificiality, theatricality, and exaggeration, with a self-aware use of irony and

parody to critique conventional taste and revel in the outrageous. Its humour is intentional, frequently highlighting the absurdity of cultural norms. Memes take this lineage further by remixing and transforming existing cultural symbols, employing a range of humour - from irony and sarcasm to absurdity and dark comedy. The progression from kitsch to camp and then to memes illustrates a shift where humour becomes increasingly self-aware and participatory. The accidental humour of kitsch evolves into the purposeful parody of camp, ultimately culminating in the interactive and iterative comedic dynamics of memes. Humour serves as the unifying thread, adapting seamlessly to the aesthetic and cultural sensibilities of each era. Memes can have a powerful impact on recipients. Kitsch in the context of political memes often implies an overly sentimental, exaggerated, or superficially pleasant aesthetic that appeals to mass tastes. This aesthetic quality helps memes become widely recognised and easily shared, thereby increasing their viral potential (Basphehlivan, 2024). An example is the golden toilet and golden loaf of the fourth President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych. In this particular example, the kitsch of the toilet and the loaf went viral because of its belonging to a political person, which destroyed the political image of businesslike and consistent behaviour and revealed to voters the primitiveness and arrogance of the owner of these attributes.

The authenticity of their existence is currently being questioned, but the circulation of their images and references to them as viral memes has finally destroyed the ex-president's reputation. The connection between kitsch in art and memes is further emphasised by the working toilet called *America* by Italian conceptual artist Maurizio Cattelan, which was created in 18-carat gold for The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and was intended for use by visitors. Its theft from the Blenheim Palace in 2019, two days after the exhibition opened, echoes the disappearance of the Yanukovych golden loaf from the former Ukrainian president's former residence in Mezhyhirya in 2015. Obviously, it was the kitschy and brightly coloured *golden* nature of objects common to everyday life that belonged to representatives of the political elite that initiated Cattelan's creation of such an art object.



Fig. 1: Cattelan, M. (2016) *America*.

As a form of comedy, they rely on the models that are present in the culture and understandable to the recipients. The audience of memes is mostly limited (clearly defined) in terms of age, sometimes focused on representatives of those professions that have constant access to social networks and are involved in the communication process. A number of memes have a pronounced cultural and national character, and their meaning may often be unclear to people from other cultures. At the same time, as a result of globalisation, a number of them acquire universal meaning in the globalised digital space and become sustainable and well-known. These include countryball, stoned fox by Adele Morse, Homunculus loxodontus by Margriet van Breevoort, and others.



Fig. 2: Morse, A. (2012) *Stoned Fox*.

Their appearance in European countries as art objects provoked a quick reaction from representatives of the post-Soviet space, becoming Internet memes.



Fig. 3: *G8 results* (2013).



The circulation of images of provocative and kitschy art objects is possible in various types of memes, including political ones.

A meme as a kind of kitsch is not *bad art* but forms its own closed system, which will be a foreign body in the general art system. With the help of memes, people express their own position and attitude to reality. Many of the media products distributed are negative in nature, often using taboo techniques, and the way they present information goes beyond the bounds of decency. Internet memes containing elements of disrespect for the government and its representatives are treated as violations of the law in totalitarian states. Their emergence is a reflection of the political culture and society in general, which is developing in a trend of massification and degradation of traditional values.



Fig. 4: van Breevoort, M. (2016) *Homunculus loxodontus*.

The spread of memes through viral means has a significant impact on the formation of the system of political values of groups and affects the behavioural mechanisms of the Internet audience, gaining the importance of a tool for managing public consciousness. Political memes have the potential to undermine dominant narratives and ideologies. Using humour and kitsch aesthetics, they can criticise and challenge political power structures. The ambiguity and irony inherent in many political memes allow them to act within and against hegemonic discourses. They circulate in a decentralised, non-hierarchical manner. This allows them to cross and connect different political and cultural contexts, making them instruments of both resistance and strengthening.

The promotion of the image of *Homunculus loxodontus* ('Waiter') in post-Soviet society was caused by the lack of ability in countries with totalitarian systems to express their position in free media. That is why the anonymous and satirical image used in memes is becoming widespread and actively transformed.





Fig. 5: *New date of visa-free regime for Ukraine known...* (2017).

Discontent can only be expressed in online communities, hiding behind the anonymity of nicknames. “Social problems cannot be addressed by a legitimate parliament, an independent court, or demonstrations, so internet satire is the only weapon against the government” (Eindeloos wachten). As with most forms of comedy, a meme contains concentrated information. It is impossible to predict other indicators of a meme, such as what form it will take, for what reasons, and when it will be used. This uncertainty makes the meme effective because of its unexpectedness and mega audience coverage.

Reactionary memes, although working through a nonsensical, vulgar, and transgressive subversion of signs, rely on historically conditioned and racially situated understandings of superiority and inferiority for the resonance and execution of their comedic effect. (Baspehlivan, 2024, p. 54)

The role of the comic in modern society is extremely important. These images that appear in the media space perform informative, emotional, motivational, and regulatory functions. Ideological influence can also be exerted through memes. An example of the successful use of the role of the comic in political life is the TV series *Servant of the People*, which allowed V. Zelenskyy to win the presidential race and, subsequently, to create a party that no one knew and which achieved maximum results in the shortest possible period, taking a parliamentary majority (*Servant of the People*, 2015).

Political memes are not only an entertaining element of digital culture, but also an important social phenomenon that shapes collective identity and responds to the challenges of our time. They combine aesthetic ambiguity with a social function, creating a space for the exchange of ideas, opinions and emotions among the participants of the networked society. Memes reflect the duality of contemporary culture: they are both simple and ironic, frivolous and critical. This ambivalence is a key feature of their aesthetics, which allows them to combine universality with subjective experience. By using humour, irony and paradox, memes create a new language of communication that unites different social groups and allows them to present complex political and cultural phenomena in an accessible way. The chapter puts a special emphasis

on the connection between memes and aesthetic concepts, such as Immanuel Kant's *subjective universality*. This feature reflects the ability of memes to evoke emotions that are universal in nature but subjective in perception. Memes also have the ability to balance between deep reflection and light entertainment, which makes them a powerful means of cultural and political expression. The kitschy aspects of memes add to their aesthetic expressiveness, turning simple images into recognisable symbols that spread quickly and remain in the mass consciousness. In this context, memes act as both a mirror of contemporary culture and a critique tool that helps to both criticise power structures and rethink the boundaries of aesthetic perception. Thus, memes are becoming a universal tool of digital culture that simultaneously reflects and shapes contemporary reality, offering the audience a means for social unity, aesthetic pleasure, and political reflection.

### 5. National Differences in Political Memes

Political memes are a global phenomenon, but they show significant differences depending on the country of origin. This differentiation is due to several factors, including cultural context, political climate, historical past, and current calls and issues. Understanding these factors is crucial to understanding how political memes function in different national contexts.

Memes often rely on local cultural references and symbols to convey messages. American memes can refer to popular TV shows, movies, or national symbols. These cultural markers help memes resonate more deeply with local audiences who share these common references. Memes in different countries use local languages, dialects, and idiomatic expressions specific to the region. It can make memes more understandable and impactful for the audience, but it can also limit their comprehensibility for outsiders.

The topics of political memes often reflect current political issues and events in a particular country. For example, during the Brexit referendum, memes from the United Kingdom featured topics related to European Union membership, immigration, and national identity. In contrast, memes from the United States during the same period could focus on domestic issues such as gun control, health care, or the presidential election. Memes often target local political leaders and public figures. The portrayal of these individuals can vary greatly depending on their political actions and public perception. For example, memes about Putin in Russia differ significantly from memes about him in Western countries, reflecting different political narratives and moods.

In countries with a colonial history, memes may include themes of resistance, identity, and postcolonial critique. The issue of indigenous populations is also relevant. In Germany, memes can sometimes refer directly or indirectly to historical events such as World War II and the Berlin Wall.

Social norms and values shape what are considered acceptable or comical in memes. In conservative societies, memes may avoid explicit content, while in more liberal societies there may be a greater tolerance for controversial or provocative humour.

The popularity of social media platforms varies from country to country, which affects how and where memes are shared. For example, while platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are widely used around the world, countries such as China have unique networks with platforms such as WeChat and Weibo that form a different and distinctive style and nature of meme distribution, which may indicate a strong need for social platforms among the population despite the ban on Facebook and Twitter. Therefore, the creation of an alternative is a mandatory response of the ruling elite to the demands of the levels of political and social communication.

In heavily censored cultural spaces, memes can use more sophisticated, encrypted language full of hidden symbolism to avoid detection, while in freer environments they can be more direct and outspoken in their criticism. As a media product that incorporates elements of other art forms, memes reveal the use of key images that are understandable to members of a particular society. South Korean political memes often incorporate elements from K-pop culture, television series, and local slang. They address issues such as North-South relations, public policy, and social justice, often combining pop culture with political criticism.

In the article *Political Memes and Fake News Discourses on Instagram*, Ahmed Al-Rawi (2021) explores the discourses surrounding fake news on Instagram, with a particular focus on political memes. He analyses the interplay between political polarisation, racism, and hate speech on this social platform. Al-Rawi collected more than 550,000 Instagram posts tagged with *#fakenews* from February 2012 to December 2018, using quantitative and qualitative analysis methods, including thematic modelling and visual metadata analysis. The study identifies two large online communities on Instagram: The Pro-Trump community and the Anti-Trump community. The pro-Trump group is much larger and more organised, actively trolling against liberal mainstream media, including CNN, and political opponents. In contrast, the anti-Trump community, while smaller, also engages in trolling aimed at discrediting Trump and his supporters.

A visual and textual analysis of the memes shows that Donald Trump is a central figure in the discussions. Pro-Trump memes often attack mainstream official media outlets as fake news, while anti-Trump memes criticise Trump's policies and actions. The results of the study suggest that Instagram has become a toxic weapon, where memes serve as a discursive weapon in the ongoing *meme war*.

These findings indicate that Instagram has become weaponised by the two main online communities, and memes are used in an ongoing political online warfare to attack and demean the opponents. Meme War II is an ongoing daily reality on Instagram which requires more scholarly attention. (Al-Rawi, 2021, p. 287)

The dominant themes in pro-Trump memes are *Alllivesmatter*, *Rightwing*, *Draintheswamp*, and *Republican*, reflecting conservative and nationalist ideologies. In contrast, anti-Trump discourse is less prevalent, but includes important themes such as *Notmypresident*, emphasising opposition to

Trump's presidency. Al-Rawi's research makes it clear that Instagram, often perceived as an apolitical space for sharing personal content, has become a battleground for political influence. The study underscores the importance of studying visual social media platforms to understand the broader effects of fake news and political polarisation.

Other memes that support Trump's policies include *MAGA* (*Make America Great Again*), *Drain the Swamp*, *CNN is Fake News*, *Build the Wall* (about the construction of a border wall between the US and Mexico), and *Pepe the Frog*. Anti-Trump memes include *Not My President*, *Dump Trump*, *Trump as Hitler*.

Marco López-Paredes and Andrea Carrillo-Andrade (2022) compare memes from the presidential debates in the United States (Trump vs. Biden) and Ecuador (Lasso vs. Arauz). According to the researchers, memes dedicated to similar events reveal their differences. For example, American memes often focus on expectations of the debate, highlighting the candidates' speeches, behaviour, and the quality of the discussion. The debate between Trump and Biden gave rise to memes that mocked the chaotic nature of the debate, the lack of substantive discussion, and the interruptions.



Fig. 6: Grant Wood's masterpiece reimagined for the 2024 election season (2024).

Mememes such as *The Old Man Yells at the Cloud* from *The Simpsons* emphasised the frustration felt by viewers. It is quite telling that in Russia, which traditionally perceives the United States as its frozen antagonist, products that

used this meme began to circulate during this period. For example, sweatshirts and T-shirts.

Instead, Ecuadorian memes tend to focus on discourtesy, violence, and personal attacks between candidates. During the Lasso vs. Arauz debate, one phrase was repeated: “Andrés, don’t lie anymore”, which reflected a common tactic in Ecuadorian politics of using catchphrases to discredit opponents. It became the basis for the meme. Another meme uses a frame from the TV series *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000), where the character’s frustration is used to humourously suggest that the moderator should provoke a fight between the candidates instead of leading a civil discussion.

These differences in focus can be explained by the different political and cultural contexts of each country. In the United States, political debates are iconic events with a long tradition, and candidates are expected to present their policies in detail and behave with dignity. In Ecuador, the political culture is more tolerant of personal attacks and theatrics, and debates place less emphasis on detailed policy discussion.

Political memes are a reflection of the social, cultural and political realities of a particular country, demonstrating the unique features of national contexts. Their structure, content, and style are shaped by local symbols, historical events, social norms, and even the specifics of language and visual media. This allows memes to be a powerful tool for local communication, although it also limits their universal comprehensibility. National differences in political memes can be clearly seen in the topics they cover and the way they are presented. For example, American memes often refer to pop culture and domestic political issues, while in countries with a colonial past, themes of national identity and resistance prevail. In countries with authoritarian regimes, memes often use veiled or symbolic forms to avoid censorship. The technological aspect also plays an important role: the use of local social media platforms, such as Weibo in China or Viber in some post-Soviet countries, creates unique styles of memes and shapes the specifics of their distribution. At the same time, in the globalised digital space, some memes acquire a universal meaning, becoming part of the world culture. Thus, political memes are not only a way to highlight current issues, but also a means of reflecting the cultural code of each nation. They serve as a platform for political criticism, social dialogue and the formation of collective consciousness, while revealing the complex interaction between global trends and local contexts.

## 6. Conclusions

Our study provides a systematic analysis of the interplay between artistic kitsch and political memes, illuminating their aesthetic, cultural, and socio-political dimensions. By tracing the evolution of kitsch from its origins as a marginal art form to its prominent role in digital culture, the research highlights its adaptability and enduring relevance in contemporary discourse.

Artistic kitsch, traditionally associated with mass consumerism and sentimental excess, is reimagined as *neo-kitsch* in the digital age. This modern



form flourishes within the interactive space of digital platforms, producing content that is both engaging and culturally resonant. Political memes, as a key manifestation of neo-kitsch, exemplify this transformation, blending humour, irony, and emotional resonance to distil complex realities into accessible and shareable formats.

Ambivalence lies at the heart of meme aesthetics. Memes possess a unique capacity to evoke emotions that are universal in essence yet subjective in perception, forming their core appeal. By transforming simple images into widely recognisable symbols that circulate rapidly and embed themselves in collective consciousness, memes establish a foundation for aesthetic evaluation. We highlight the dual function of political memes as tools of critique and cohesion. While they amplify political narratives and encourage engagement through their wit and relevance, they also risk oversimplifying intricate issues, raising concerns about the depth and quality of political discourse. This ambivalence reflects a broader tension within digital media between the democratisation of cultural production and the homogenisation of content.

A significant contribution of this paper is its focus on the balance between local specificity and global universality within meme culture. Many political memes are deeply rooted in their national contexts, drawing upon local histories, symbols, and languages. Simultaneously, others transcend these boundaries, resonating with global audiences through shared cultural references and aesthetic sensibilities. This duality positions political memes as both reflections of their immediate socio-political contexts and participants in a globalised cultural dialogue.

We emphasise the crucial influence of technological and socio-political contexts in shaping the nature and impact of memes. In authoritarian settings, political memes often adopt veiled or encrypted forms, functioning as sophisticated tools of resistance. Conversely, in more open societies, they frequently serve as direct critiques, reinforcing dissent and fostering dialogue. This flexibility underscores their role as a versatile medium of expression across diverse socio-political landscapes.

By situating political memes within the broader framework of kitsch aesthetics, our study underscores their cultural and political significance. Memes emerge not merely as fleeting artefacts of digital culture but as potent instruments for identity formation, community building, and resistance to ideologies. Their capacity to intertwine humour with critical reflection ensures their ongoing relevance in navigating the complexities of contemporary society.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14772442